Syria Analysis Game
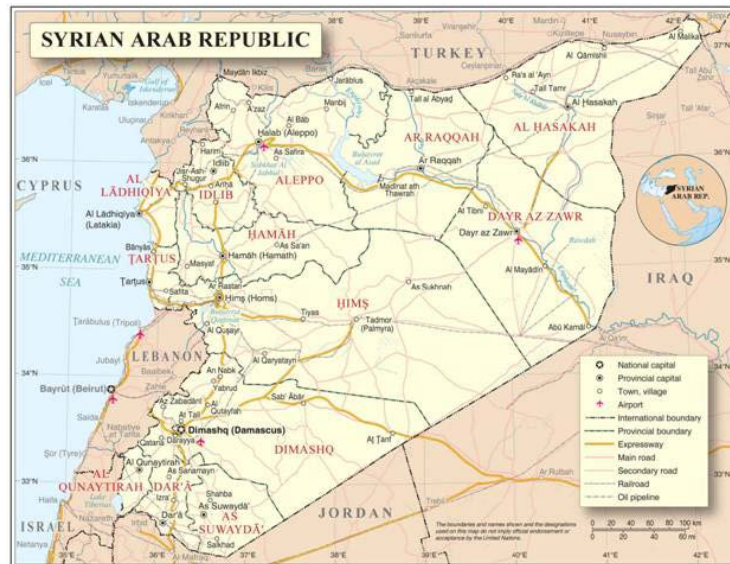
13 – 14 September 2012

UNITED STATES ARMY WAR COLLEGE

Center for Strategic Leadership & Development

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Report Documentation Page		*Form Approved* *OMB No. 0704-0188*

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1. REPORT DATE **SEP 2012**	2. REPORT TYPE	3. DATES COVERED **00-00-2012 to 00-00-2012**
4. TITLE AND SUBTITLE **Syria Analysis Game**		5a. CONTRACT NUMBER
		5b. GRANT NUMBER
		5c. PROGRAM ELEMENT NUMBER
6. AUTHOR(S)		5d. PROJECT NUMBER
		5e. TASK NUMBER
		5f. WORK UNIT NUMBER
7. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES) **U.S. Army War College,Center for Strategic Leadership & Development,650 Wright Ave,Carlisle Barracks,PA,17013**		8. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION REPORT NUMBER
9. SPONSORING/MONITORING AGENCY NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES)		10. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S ACRONYM(S)
		11. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S REPORT NUMBER(S)

12. DISTRIBUTION/AVAILABILITY STATEMENT **Approved for public release; distribution unlimited**

13. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES

14. ABSTRACT

15. SUBJECT TERMS

16. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF:			17. LIMITATION OF ABSTRACT	18. NUMBER OF PAGES	19a. NAME OF RESPONSIBLE PERSON
a. REPORT **unclassified**	b. ABSTRACT **unclassified**	c. THIS PAGE **unclassified**	**Same as Report (SAR)**	**7**	

Executive Summary

The U.S. Army War College convened the first of a series of wargames to consider current issues of Senior Leader interest to assess alternative outcomes and potential implications for the U.S. Army. The first wargame in this new series focused on potential Army requirements in the ongoing Syrian conflict. This wargame leveraged the regional expertise of International Fellows as well as faculty subject matter experts and the Army G-35 to derive findings and recommendations to inform senior leader understanding of the conflict.

This wargame focused on gaining insights into regional partner equities and reactions that might shape U.S. responses. Participants evaluated alternative scenarios to assess their likelihood and the likely positions their nations would take in each alternative. Unsurprisingly, the most important objective for regional partners was restored regional stability. To that end, a key finding is that regional partners would accept Assad retaining power conditioned on an agreement to a brokered transition of power over time. A smaller number of participants want to see Assad go as soon as possible. These conflicting positions potentially place current U.S. policy at odds with regional partner desires. As such conflicting partner equities represent the potential for friction with any potential U.S. responses. Regional partners did identify roles and missions for U.S. military involvement but they specifically do not desire overt U.S. military actions except to potentially secure Syrian chemical weapons or to increase security cooperation activities. These dynamics indicate a clear requirement for further assessment to inform policy and military decision-making, as well as risk mitigation measures.

A second key finding of this wargame is that regional actors would support intervention to prevent Syria from devolving into separate states along sectarian lines. This scenario also requires a detailed assessment of potential U.S. responses in this contingency.

Other, more predictable, findings verify partner needs, which senior leaders should consider:

- Increased security cooperation activities with our partners such as raising the priority on foreign military sales programs, or additional exercises/training to bolster regional security forces.
- Developing responses to assist regional partner nations with a sudden increase in refugees; concurrently developing a response to internally displaced persons within Syria that may require humanitarian assistance.
- Developing responses to secure chemical weapons or otherwise prevent their loss of control/accountability.

United States Army War College
Wargame 1-12 (SYRIA)

On 13-14 September 2012, the United States Army War College convened a group of regional and subject matter experts to consider alternative outcomes of the ongoing Syrian conflict, and identify implications for the Army. All products generated from this assessment are unclassified.[i]

Findings and Observations.

Likely Outcomes: Participants considered the likelihood of alternative outcomes and assessed that a full civil war was likely in the near-term with major elements of the Syrian Army choosing sides. Participants indicated the most likely outcomes of this war include Syria devolving into separate states formed along sectarian lines or that Assad retains power, albeit in a weakened state. There was little discussion on an outcome where Assad loses to the opposition. A majority of participants believe that eventually civil war will drive Assad into a negotiated departure, brokered by an outside agent. A minority voiced the opinion that Assad would win and survive long-term as long as political and physical support from Russia, China and Iran continue. Participants who supported this view noted that Assad's Alawite supporters are in an existential struggle with no real option but to continue to support the regime. Similarly, Assad's support among the Army and more affluent urban Sunnis will likely remain strong as long as they view Assad as a more favorable alternative to the potential that Islamists would replace him.

Stability is Strategic Driver: The driving concern among all participants was growing regional instability and the concomitant issue of refugees. Participants believe that instability will inevitably travel along religious, ethnic and even tribal linkages to Syria's immediate neighbors. Underlying this belief were interconnected notions of Syria's central geographic and cultural position in the region. Participants acknowledged that this struggle is very difficult to contain within Syria because of ethnic and sectarian linkages across borders. A factor affecting all of Syria's immediate neighbors (Turkey, Israel, Jordan and Iraq), spreading sectarian and ethnic unrest is viewed as most significant to Lebanon, where even a minor shift in demographics could disrupt an already delicate ethnic balance.

Preference for Assad Retaining Power: With restoration of regional stability as the driver, a key finding is that participants viewed the potential for Assad to retain power in the near-term as acceptable with an agreed transition of power over time. Regional partners viewed this outcome as less bad than a scenario where full civil war led to the potential for separate sectarian states to emerge. Indeed, most participants viewed the prospect of separate sectarian states as the worst case and unacceptable. A second key finding, regional partners also believed multiple external states would act to prevent this outcome. Participants indicated that fear of the potential for emerging sectarian states reinforces the notion that Assad retaining power is an acceptable solution to mitigate the spread of instability across

borders. While Assad's continued grip on power could be tolerated by most regional states, the acquiescence of Syria's neighbors would likely be contingent upon a limit to post-hostility reprisals against former opposition populations. Participants offered no rationale on the conditions or triggers upon which external actors would intervene in Syria. Regional partner assumptions on intervention were based on a belief that the international community would not accept the emergence of unstable sectarian states.

Implications of Refugees and Internally Displaced Persons: All participants agreed that the movement of refugees both within Syria and into neighboring countries would worsen as the conflict drags on. The majority of participants believed the sheer numbers of refugees would soon outstrip the capacity of Syria's neighbors to adequately respond. A significant distinction was drawn by one participant with broad support from others between 'humanitarian' and 'political' refugees. The distinction was not drawn on the circumstances from which the refugee fled (as is the custom for the United Nations and most Non-Governmental Organizations) but was determined by the potential impact on the host country. Thus, a humanitarian refugee was an individual who simply required basic human needs met. Conversely, a political refugee is one who may potentially have an impact on the internal politics of the host country. In general, the group believed that humanitarian refugees would be welcome up to the logistical capacity of the host country and the international community to support. Participants predicted that political refugees would not be welcome at all. Participants offered an assessment of Syria's neighbors who accept refugees and how each state might view them:

Turkey. Participants believed that Syrian refugees to Turkey would, generally, be treated as humanitarian refugees. As such, Turkey would welcome and assist them to the limits of their capacity, which would likely not be sufficient to the need. The group predicted that a large percentage of Syrian refugees trying to enter Turkey would be Kurdish which could present potential problems if Turkey perceived that members of the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) were using the situation to infiltrate Turkey.

Iraq. There was a clear distinction drawn between the positions of the Iraqi Federal Government and the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG). This is largely due to the fact that most Syrian refugees entering northern Iraq are Kurds, while those entering western Iraq are Sunnis. For the KRG, Syrian refugees are perceived as humanitarian and the KRG is expected to continue to welcome refugees from Syria. Conversely, the Shiite dominated Iraqi Federal Government perceives the Syrian Sunni refugees as political because they will likely affect the sectarian balance within Iraq. Thus, the KRG is expected to continue to be receptive to refugees while the Iraqi Federal Government will be much less welcoming.

Jordan. All participants agreed that Syrian refugees are perceived as humanitarian to the Jordanian Government and therefore will be welcome. The major concern voiced by the regional participants was Jordan's capacity to accept and properly care for significant numbers of additional refugees as they already host large numbers of Palestinians[ii]. Because Jordan has its own demographic

challenge with a Palestinian majority, the idea of an influx of an additional half million Palestinians is a major concern.

Lebanon. Because of extensive familial, ethnic and sectarian linkages between Lebanese and Syrians, a substantial refugee influx is both probable and problematic. It is likely that the Lebanese government will view any large scale exodus into Lebanon as a threat to the delicate political balance that currently exists within the Lebanese body politic. Based on this belief, participants believed that almost all potential Syrian refugees would be considered a political threat and therefore unwelcome in Lebanon.

Israel. Participants indicated a belief that persistent Arab-Israeli dynamics, and difficulty of crossing the heavily defended Syria-Israeli border would mean potential refugees will likely self-select to not go to Israel. Thus Israel is unlikely to host Syrian refugees.[iii]

Reaction to U.S. Actions. Most participants supported suggestions that U.S. actions in Syria should not be overt and primarily focused on indirect support to regional partners. Participants were clearly focused on reducing instability and believed that direct, large scale U.S. military involvement in Syria would serve as a polarizing force and increase the likelihood of greater instability. Although participants recognized that the continued survival of the Assad regime was not the preferred outcome other international actors including the United States Government, most believed that the U.S. should accept such an outcome, particularly if an exit strategy for Bashar Assad and senior Ba'athist officials could be engineered. If such an exit could be achieved, the participants believed that the Ba'athist regime could maintain an acceptable level of stability. In the event that Assad personally retains power, the majority of participants believed that the Syrian government would attempt to punish neighbors believed to have supported its opponents.

Securing Chemical Weapons. The majority considered the possible loss of control of chemical weapons a major concern in all scenarios. As such, this was one issue that appeared to have broad support for direct U.S. military action in order to mitigate its effects.

Support to Refugees and IDPs. Regional participants frequently discussed the establishment of Safe Zones and No Fly Zones. This was motivated by the fact that Syria's neighbors clearly prefer supporting Internally Displaced Persons (IDP) inside the borders of Syria rather than refugees in their own countries. The discussion typically concluded that any such action would require UN Security Council approval and would likely be vetoed by Russia and China. When facilitators or faculty tried to challenge the practicality of action without a UN mandate, the participants sidestepped the issue. Similarly, there was reluctance to address the likelihood of NGO participation without adequate security. So while the option to use multinational capabilities to protect IDPs would appear acceptable to regional partners, the circumstances under which this mission might be executed in a secure way under UN or Coalition auspices remains unclear.

External Influences. Finally, an overarching theme emerging from the game was the influence of Iran and actors outside the region (in particular Russia and China) to Syria's future. Participants acknowledged that Russia has a large investment in Syria and will not easily let go of its foothold there. American diplomatic efforts with outside actors, especially Russia, were identified as the most probable paths to stability in the region. If Assad were to retain power, regional participants believed this outcome would be broadly perceived as a win for Iran, China, and Russia and a loss for the United States. Participants believed that the regional states would accommodate this outcome and learn how to live with Assad (or a Ba'athist government less Assad) still in power.

Recommendations

Sensitivities to direct U.S. involvement among our regional partners coupled with current U.S. policy pronouncements indicate the United States is unlikely to intervene directly in Syria. Currently, Army involvement in the region is largely confined to security cooperation activities focused on capacity building among partners in the U.S. CENTCOM region and NATO activities in the area. While these should continue, this assessment suggests prudence in U.S. contingency planning to support conflict resolution in Syria that considers conflicting partner equities in long-term regional stability. Regional partner requirements for U.S. assistance also drive the need for focused U.S. planning with regard to the following:

Humanitarian Assistance & Support. The importance attached to humanitarian assistance requirements for either IDPs or refugees was a common theme in all scenarios. Aided by international humanitarian organizations, Syria's neighbors can, at present, generally absorb more refugees. The possible exception to this assertion is Jordan, who is already contending with significant Iraqi & Syrian refugees. Jordan's fragile economy may not be able to withstand additional refugee stress, leading to attempts to close the Jordanian border. If violence inside Syria continues and grows, Syria's neighbors will likely all reach a breaking point at which they prefer to keep the "refugee problem" inside Syria and close their borders. This assessment suggests that U.S. Army Leaders should develop contingency plans to support both IDPs inside Syria or refugees in neighboring states.

If Syria's neighbors continue to allow large numbers of refugees into their territory, the need for direct U.S. involvement is minimized. In this situation, planners should coordinate early with our regional partners to identify support requirements and the role of Landpower. At minimum, the Army should plan to respond to partner requests for increased security cooperation activities including increased priority for equipment deliveries, expanded roles in cooperative exercises/training, deployment of mobile medical and logistic units or to bolster regional security forces[iv].

The accumulation of displaced persons inside Syrian borders (either voluntarily or forcibly), complicates humanitarian assistance efforts. Assuming that the United States would only attempt assistance inside Syria under the sanction of a United Nations resolution, regional partners would support

U.S. involvement. In this case, Operation Provide Comfort (northern Iraq, 1991) should serve as a guide for Army planners with a possible increased requirement for security forces to establish safe havens.

Chemical Weapons Security. A chief concern to the participants was the security of Syria's chemical weapons. Regional partners clearly believe the U.S. possesses the capability to secure these weapons if we choose to do so. Securing Syria's chemical weapons stocks is clearly the most challenging mission for U.S. forces short of occupation. The sheer volume of chemicals involved would require U.S. forces to seize and hold several large sites for a significant time. This entails locating, identifying and disposing of weapons either by physical destruction or consolidating them in a secure area. If securing Syrian chemical weapon stocks were to become imperative, the group indicated that the U.S. should coordinate its response with regional partners and the UN to increase international support and mitigate backlash from any action.

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[i] Report No. 128, "Syria's Mutating Conflict", 1 August 2012, produced by the International Crisis Group Middle East was used as the baseline for facts common to all scenarios. This document was provided to all participants prior to the wargame. Leveraging existing expertise at the USAWC, the participants included five members of faculty, five International Fellows from the region, and a representative of Army G-35 International Affairs. The game used a descriptive scenario approach where participants analyzed the scenario in a collegial environment to facilitate discussion amongst players, particularly the International Fellows. Facilitators were used to maintain dialogue and present questions. Data collectors recorded responses and tabulated results.

The participants were asked the same four specific questions concerning each scenario:
1) What will be each regional state's alignment with respect to the Syrian Government and its opposition;
2) What is the likelihood of each scenario and what are the adverse regional security outcomes for Syria's neighbors;
3) What is the capacity for each regional state to support people displaced by the conflict;
4) What is the appropriate U.S. response to the situation in Syria?

[ii] This concern is exacerbated by the fact that a significant number of potential refugees likely to seek refuge in Jordan are Palestinians who are already refugees in Syria [specifically the 500,000 refugees in the Yarmouk Camp although no participant mentioned Yarmouk Camp by name].

[iii] The conclusion was explicitly stated by event participants, the underlying reasoning was surmised by the report authors.

[iv] Each of these potential activities was specifically addressed by the international participants during indicating areas for expanded security cooperation opportunities.